



November 13, 2012

Statement to the House Education Committee

Proposed Legislation Could Dismantle Education Reform Agenda and Public Schools

Legislation proposed for too hasty action in the lame duck session, HB 6004, HB5923, SB1358 (and any companion legislation), represent a dramatic change in how we operate and fund education. By allowing a host of new schools to be created, these proposals taken together threaten to replace a durable bi-partisan education reform strategy with a “Wild West” of unfettered, unregulated new school creation, untethered from the goal of improving learning and student outcomes. If implemented it could erode or destroy completely our current public schools and education system, in favor of a chaotic, often for-profit-provided education marketplace.

State Board of Education Members have a number of concerns with elements of the proposed EAA-enabling legislation. We also on a unified bi-partisan basis oppose companion legislation HB5923 as written, and call on the Legislature to slow down in order to address issues of educational quality, and the legislation’s impact on the total learning system in Michigan. The undersigned Democratic Majority State Board feel compelled to go further and underscore the reasons a much better approach to expanding quality school choice, and managing school turnaround is needed.

Through three Presidents, three Michigan Governors, and a series of state superintendents, the State Board has supported a consistent path of education reform focused on: Rigorous learning standards for all students; Strong accountability and assessment systems that tell us clearly what students are learning, which schools are effective, and the quality of our teachers; Structural reforms to the delivery of education to improve student learning and outcomes; Meaningful sanctions for non-performing schools; and, Creation of new, quality educational choices for families in the form of new schools, charter schools, expanded in-and-out of district choices, particularly where schools are not educating students successfully.

Legislation before this committee threatens to throw out this coherent reform for an unlimited and largely unregulated marketplace of on-line schools, for profit- run schools, schools run by businesses, universities, community organizations, and municipal governments. HB5923 would allow new authorizers to create schools in any location, for any reason, with little oversight, and no expectation they will improve education quality and outcomes. Under HB 6004 the EAA Chancellor could delegate school management to one individual, or a private company, again with no quality expectations.

The legislation includes no rationale for how this proliferation of new schools will improve overall education quality and outcomes. There are no expectations set for ensuring new choices provide as good or a better education for enrolled students than existing schools. There is no priority placed on new quality choices where students need them, versus where schools are performing well. There are no expectations concerning minimum qualifications for school operators, nor a track record of success in education management that might credibly predict that new schools could be successful with students.

There is no discussion of the impact, financial and otherwise, on the existing public school system of this new marketplace for education. All these new school variants require public resources, that if implemented, will have a huge impact on the maintenance, performance, and ability to improve existing public schools.

An analogy to the lack of oversight of Wall Street that led to the financial collapse is not out of line: This legislation is proposing a whole new family of costly educational products, most of which we have no idea if or how they work, with no regulation nor performance expectations. This is a recipe for an educational system meltdown.

We believe that new choices in education delivery must be considered in the context of a coherent strategy for improving educational performance and outcomes for all students in Michigan. New schools and new choices are not a good in and of themselves, particularly if: a) they don't provide the particular student better learning, and better outcomes; and, b) they degrade the overall performance of the public school system, and hurt other children.

Unless the theory guiding this legislation is that a true competitive marketplace for education improves outcomes for all. If this is the theory at work—that competition among education providers, and individuals ability to “shop” for the best education, and pieces of education for themselves is the answer-- then the Legislation needs to say as much. But furthermore, if a marketplace is being called for, then all the elements necessary to make a market work need to be in place, including:

All students and families must have the ability to access any and all choices. They would need to both know about and be able to get to the schools they wanted to buy. This would mean, among other things, that Detroit or Pontiac families and their children would need access on an equal basis to Birmingham schools or Grosse Pointe schools, and have transportation provided to any other school choices they wanted. A marketplace doesn't exist unless customers have the ability to choose the product. And how do customers value and buy the other important pieces of their education? the teacher-mentor, the football team and band, the peer-counseling student group, the school newspaper?

The truth is education is not a “product” like other products and our school system is not a Wall Street trading floor. It is a personal journey of knowledge and skill-building nurtured by great teachers, in a supportive community.

Clearly the implications of unfettered new schools, with dollars following students, on the current public education system, and certainly the impacts on the neighborhood school—are tremendous, not fully considered here, and must be attended to in any coherent reform agenda.

This marketplace for education looks a lot like a voucher program where individuals get the money and shop for what they want in education. This was rejected by Michigan voters before—in part because of its perceived impact on local school systems around the state.

That is why Democratic majority of the State Board of Education, strongly oppose House Bill 5923, and related elements of House Bill 6004.

John Austin, President; Casandra Ulbrich, Vice-President; Marianne Yared McGuire, Treasurer; Kathleen Straus, and Dan Varner, Members